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## THE MEN OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE.

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Possibly the most common traditional view of the Great Synagogue is, that it was a semi-miraculous body of men, organized by Ezra for the purpose of putting the Hebrew Scriptures into final shape, and composed of men who were contemporary with him and with one another. Some difficulties attending this view are obviated by supposing that the men who composed the Great Synagogue, instead of being contemporaneous, formed a succession extending through several generations. In direct opposition to both these views, many scholars assert that the Great Synagogue of tradition had no real existence, and that the accounts of it, which have come down to us, are mere Mid-rashic enlargements of the account of the great convocation described in Neh. VIII.—X. Still a fourth view, well presented in the article on the subject in McClintock and Strong, and in the sources whence that article is taken, is that the Great Synagogue was a somewhat permanent body, organized at the time of the convocation of Nehemiah.

In the face of these conflicting views, it must be admitted that the state of public knowledge in the matter is somewhat nebulous and uncertain. Does it follow that what has commonly been cited as the evidence of the Great Synagogue concerning the Scriptures is equally uncertain? Must we wait until the current differences regarding the Great Synagogue are cleared up, before we venture to make further use of this evidence? To answer this question in the negative is the object of the present article.

## I.

Let us first examine a few specimens of the traditional testimonies concerning the Great Synagogue.

Maimonides, that most illustrious of Israelitish scholars, who flourished in Spain in the latter half of the 12th century, sums up the Israelitish traditions in a classic passage which is often cited in works on the subject. The following citation of it is translated from Ugolino, Vol. I., Col. 12. "By the Consistory of Ezra are understood the men of the Great Synagogue, to wit: Zacharias, Malachi, Daniel, Hana-nias, Misael, Agarias, Nehemias, son of Hechelias, Mardocheus, Belsan, Zorobabel, and many wise men with them. In all they were 120

elders, the last of whom within the number 120 was Simon the Just, who received the oral law from all these, and was high priest after Ezra."

This passage gives an outline of the whole tradition. Passages containing parts of it are numerous, and are of all dates back nearly to the time of Jesus.

Rabbi Nathan, the Babylonian, is said to have been the vicar of Simon II., A. D. 140-163. The Talmudic treatise "Pirke Aboth," attributed to him, is said to contain a mention of the Gemara, showing that passages in it did not receive their present form earlier than about 300 A. D. But probably no one would claim that the two opening sections are later than the days of Nathan himself. These sections are thus translated by Robert Young:

1. "Moses received the law from Sinai, and delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets delivered it to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: "Be deliberate in judgment; train up many disciples; and make a fence for the law."
2. "Simon the Just, was of the remnant of the Great Synagogue. He used to say, 'On three things the world standeth,—on the law, and on the service [of God], and on gratitude for kindness.'"

Here we have it assumed, as a familiarly known fact, that there had been a body of men later in date than those properly known as the men of the Great Synagogue.

For convenience, the two following citations are from Robertson Smith's lectures on the Jewish Church, from notes eight and three on Lecture VI. Different from the "Pirke Aboth" is the work entitled "The Aboth by Rabbi Nathan," printed in the editions of the Talmud among the appendices or Apocrypha, after the Talmud itself. From this Smith quotes: "At first they said that Proverbs, Canticles and Ecclesiastes are apocryphal. They said they are parabolic writings, and not of the Hagiographa. So they prepared to suppress them, till the men of the Great Synagogue came and explained them." And from the Midrash to Ruth, which the article "Midrash" in McClintock and Strong dates at about 278 A. D., he quotes: "What did the men of the Great Synagogue do? They wrote a book and spread it out in the court of the temple. And at dawn of day they rose and found it sealed. This is what is written in Neh. ix. 38."

The celebrated passage from the Talmudic treatise "Baba Batra,"

in which the authorship of the several books of the Hebrew canon is declared, is cited in many of the books of reference. The following copy of part of it is, except the inserted Hebrew letters, from the English edition of Smith's Bible Dictionary: "Jeremiah wrote his own book, the books of Kings and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his friends [reduced to writing] the books contained in the memorial word **יִמְשֵׁק**, Isaiah, Proverbs, Canticles, Ecclesiastes. The men of the Great Synagogue [reduced to writing] the books contained in the memorial word **קִנְדִּי**, Ezekiel, the 12 lesser prophets, Daniel and Esther. Ezra wrote his own book, and brought down the genealogies of the books of Chronicles to his own times. \* \* \* Who brought the remainder of the books [of Chronicles] to a close? Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah."

Stuart, in his *Work on the Canon* (Andover ed. of 1872, p. 268), quotes as follows from the Commentary of Rabbi Solomon Jarchi (A. D. 1040-1105), upon this passage. "The men of the Great Synagogue wrote out Ezekiel, who prophesied in exile. And I know not why Ezekiel did not write it out himself, except that prophecy is not given for any one to write it in a foreign country. They wrote it out after they returned to the holy land. And so, in respect to the book of Daniel, who lived in exile; and so, in regard to the volume of Esther. And as to the 12 prophets, because their prophecies were brief, the prophets did not themselves write them down, each one his own book. But when Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi came, and saw that the Holy Spirit was about to depart, inasmuch as they were the last prophets, then they rose up and wrote down their prophecies, and joined those of the minor prophets with them, and thus made one large book, so that they might not perish on account of their smallness." (The translation is slightly changed from the English of Prof. Stuart.)

Since Ezra figures as the founder of the Great Synagogue and its work, we must add a specimen of what tradition says about him. Dr. Bissell translates the classic passage in 4 Esd. XIV., as follows, beginning at the 20th verse, where Ezra is represented as himself speaking: "The world therefore lieth in darkness, and they that dwell therein are without light, since thy law is burnt; therefore no man knoweth the things that are done by thee, or the works that shall begin. But if I have found grace before thee, send the Holy spirit into me, and I will write all that hath taken place in the world since the beginning, which were written in thy law, that men may find a path, and that they who

live in the later days may live." Then the account says that Ezra, at God's command, gave notice to the people not to seek him for 40 days, took five rapid penmen with him, and retired "into the field." Then a peculiar drink was given him, "and when I had drunk of it, my heart streamed over with understanding, and wisdom grew in my breast, for my spirit strengthened my memory. And my mouth was opened, and shut no more. But the Most High gave understanding unto the five men, and they wrote the visions of the night which were told them, which they knew not. And they sat 40 days; but they wrote in the day time, and at night they ate bread. But I spake in the day, and was not silent by night. In 40 days they wrote 94 books." The Syriac adds: And it came to pass, when the 40 days were fulfilled, that the Most High spake, saying—The first that thou hast written publish openly, that the worthy and unworthy may read; but keep the 70 later ones, that thou mayest deliver them to such as are wise among the people." There is here some uncertainty, both as to text and as to date. Bissell dates the work A. D. 89-96.

We must not take time further to look over the original authorities for the traditions concerning Ezra. The passages are numerous, and are freely referred to in the Bible Dictionary articles and other current sources of information. Lord Henry says, in Smith's Bible Dictionary, that the traditions attributed to Ezra, "the settling of the canons of Scripture, and restoring, correcting and editing the whole Sacred Volume according to the threefold arrangement of the Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, with the divisions of the *pesukim*, or verses, the vowel-points handed down by tradition from Moses, and the emendations of the *Keri*." Ezra is said to have been destined to be the medium through which the law was to be given, except that Moses antedated him, so that it was only possible for Ezra to be the *second* giver of the law. He is said to have introduced the present alphabet, in place of the one formerly used, to have written most of the later books, to have established synagogues; and indeed, the variety of matters attributed to him is almost endless.

## II.

These specimens of the evidence are taken quite at random, and, for quality, probably represent the whole. So far as the reaching of definite results as to the actual character of the Great Synagogue is concerned, the field is not promising.

Etheridge, pp. 18-22, summing up the evidence, says that Ezra,

B. C. 458, "associated with himself some of the most eminent men of the age, as an organized Synod or College, commonly called the Great Synagogue." He says that it comprised such men as Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel, &c., and "terminated with the life of Simon the Just, its last surviving member. The entire number of which it was composed is said to have been 120, in a succession stretching through a period of about as many years." He represents the Great Synagogue as engaged in "collecting, authenticating, and defining the canonical books of the Old Testament, in multiplying copies of them by careful transcription, in explaining them to the people themselves, and in establishing an agency for the inculcation of the Word of God upon the people, in" the institution of synagogues.

It cannot escape attention that this summary of Etheridge is quite different from that of Maimonides. Etheridge makes the duration of the Great Synagogue to be about 120 years. To make this number, he dates the death of Simon about 320 B. C. The date he assigns to Ezra is 458 B. C. Hence he either dates the organization of the Great Synagogue 18 years later than that, or else dates its close 18 years before the death of Simon, or adjusts his numerals in some other similar way. But Josephus says that Jaddua the high priest died at about the same time with Alexander the Great, that is, about 323 B. C. The death of Simon can hardly have been less than 30 years later. Besides, Maimonides carefully includes Daniel and his three companions among the members of the Great Synagogue. This institution, as he describes it, must have begun to exist before the middle of the sixth century B. C., and must have continued in existence more than two and a half centuries.

Etheridge is perhaps a good representation of the men who hold the traditional view. Considering the treatment of the evidence which this view involves, it is no wonder that men like Krochmal and Graetz have attempted to establish entirely different views. And as the matter now stands, it can hardly be expected that persons who are not experts will adopt, with very decided intensity of conviction, any of the conflicting views now advocated.

Fortunately, for purposes of Biblical study, it is not necessary to adopt either. So far as testimony concerning the Bible is concerned, we have to deal, not with the real or supposed institution known as the Great Synagogue, but with a succession of men who, on any theory, may appropriately be called the men of the Great Synagogue. This

distinction has not been emphasized as it should be, but it is a true distinction. And it is important; for however confused the evidence may be concerning the institution, the evidence concerning the men is, at all important points, clear and indisputable.

This succession of men, from Daniel to Simon the Just, actually existed. The proof of this fact is not affected by the fabulous elements contained in the evidence. It is certain that these men were historical characters and not myths. It is now impossible to make out a list of 120 historical names and say, 'These are the names of the 120 men whom tradition groups as the men of the Great Synagogue.' It is equally impossible to deny that such a list may once have existed. But however it may be as to the number of them, the men themselves were the statesmen, governors, prophets, high priests and other prominent men of their times.

Secondly, it is certain that these men, Daniel, Ezra, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and the others, were somewhat prominently occupied with studies in the ancient scriptures of their people. Daniel (IX. 2) "understood by *the books*, the number of the years concerning which was the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet." In Ezra VII. 6, Ezra is described as "a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel gave." In V. 11, he is "Ezra the priest, the scribe writing as scribe the words of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes upon Israel." In the next verse, he is "Ezra the priest, the ready scribe of the legislation of the God of the heavens." Similar language concerning him is used in Neh. XII. 26, 36, and throughout Neh. VIII. 10. In these chapters, Ezra, Nehemiah and others, who figure, in the tradition, as men of the Great Synagogue, are represented as engaged in a systematic attempt to spread the knowledge of the law of the LORD.

Thirdly, whether these men formed a special organization by themselves or not, they were contemporaneous with organized arrangements for the care of the sacred books, and are likely, many of them, at least, to have belonged to these organizations. Perhaps only Ezra and Zadok (Neh. XIII. 13) are personally called scribes; but we learn from I Chron. II. 55, that the scribes were somewhat numerous, and existed in recognized organizations or "families."

Fourthly, it needs no additional argument to prove that these men, whatever be the truth concerning the so-called Great Synagogue itself, may, as a succession of men, fairly be called by the descriptive term "the men of the Great Synagogue."

Nor, fifthly, does it need argument to show that, among these men of the Great Synagogue, Ezra is pre-eminently the representative man. He was by no means the first man in the succession. Daniel and his three friends were earlier. So were the men who led the first expedition in the return from the exile. But Ezra was the man whose spirit dominated in the work done by this succession of men. The later books of the Old Testament attributed to him special prominence in it. He was a priest. He was a leader. He was a great man. He had prophetic gifts. But none of these respects, in which he was so great, is chosen by which to characterize him. His characteristic, as we have seen, is that he was a scribe. Moses does not stand out more clearly as the great legislator of the Bible, or David as the great singer, or Solomon as the great builder, or Josiah as the great reformer, than does Ezra as the great scribe. These facts, put in connection with the role which tradition has assigned to him, point out distinctly that he had something very remarkable to do with the digesting of the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures into their final form.

Inadvertently the Septuagint translators, in Ezra VII. 11, have given us a pretty distinct intimation as to what the common opinion of their day was concerning the nature of the work of Ezra. The Hebrew of that verse is, "Ezra the priest, the scribe writing as scribe the words of the commandments of the LORD." The Greek translators, instead of reading the second סֵפֶר as סֹפֵר, *writing as scribe*, read it סֵפֶר, *book*, making the translation to be, "Ezra the priest, the scribe of the book of the words of the commandments of the LORD." The generation to which these translators belonged evidently regarded Ezra as in some important and peculiar sense *the* scribe of the LORD'S Bible. Doubtless they were mistaken in translating, but it is a mistake of the sort which quite strikingly shows what their preconceived opinions of the matter were. We have here a notice of Ezra's Old Testament work, additional to those contained in the Old Testament itself, some hundreds of years earlier, and vastly more trustworthy than that in chap. XIV. of 4 Esúras.

Summing up the whole matter, the uncertainties concerning the Great Synagogue itself are not of such a nature as to forbid our accepting, at whatever value may properly belong to them, the testimonies concerning the Biblical work done by the men of the Great Synagogue.